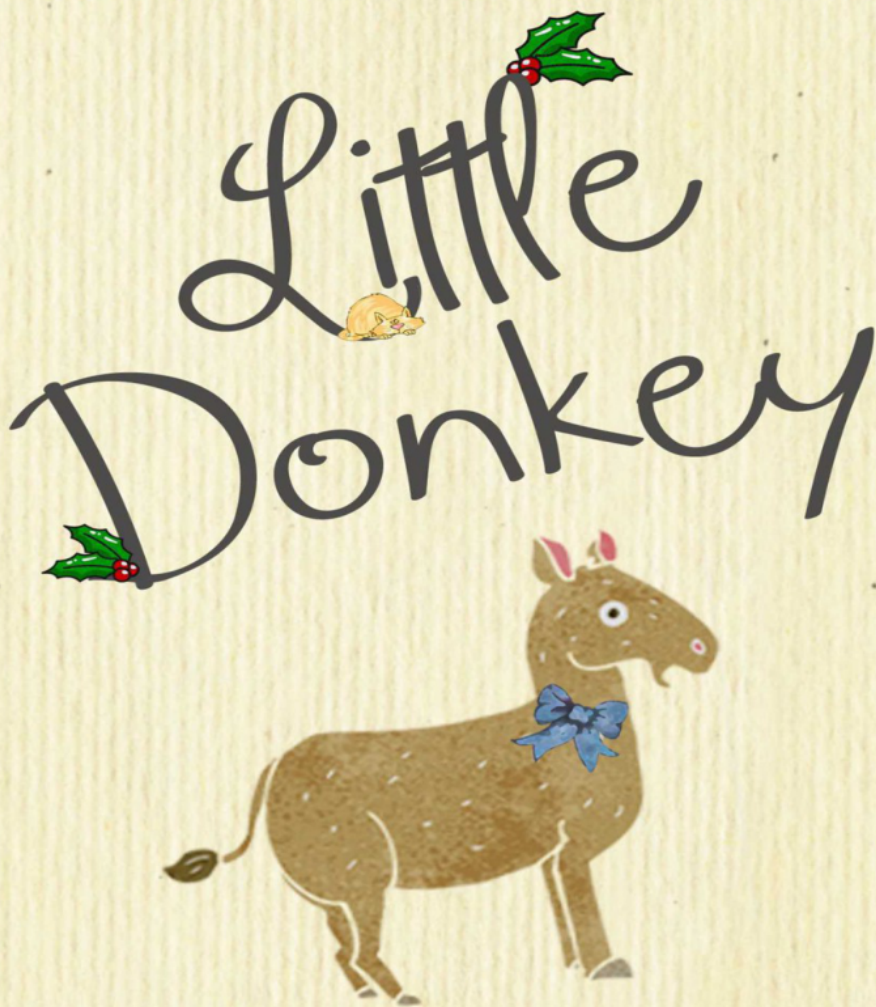


*A Christmas short story featuring old friends  
from the bestselling novel  
The Nothing Girl*



Jodi Taylor

# **Little Donkey**

**A Frogmorton Farm Christmas short  
story**

**Jodi Taylor**

It's Christmas and Jenny Checkland is beset with problems.

The vicar, who really should know better, has asked to borrow Marilyn the donkey for the nativity play, thereby unleashing chaos on the already chaos-laden Frogmorton Farm.

Will Marilyn survive her bath? Will anyone survive Marilyn's bath?

Robbed of her role as the Virgin Mary, what revenge is the Angel Gabriel plotting? Can Marilyn be prevented from eating the Baby Jesus? Why is that sheep so fat?

Where is Thomas, who promised he would be there?

And worst of all – will Russell, lost on the moor in a blizzard, make it back in time for the birth of his first child? Or even at all?

Another chance to meet the characters from the best-selling novel, *The Nothing Girl*, as they navigate the complexities of the local nativity play in their own unique fashion.

‘And so, Mrs Checkland,’ said the vicar, finishing his preamble and second cup of tea simultaneously, ‘I was wondering if we could possibly borrow your dear little donkey?’

Behind him, our housekeeper, Mrs Crisp, turned from stirring something on the stove. She stared in amazement, opened her mouth to say something, caught my eye, and changed her mind. Her ladle dripped, unheeded, onto her spotless kitchen floor.

At the other end of the kitchen table, Kevin and Sharon were still grappling with the dimension-defying chaotic tangle that our Christmas lights and tinsel together had somehow managed to achieve during the eleven and a half months they’d been stored under the stairs. They also stared at him. In the silence, we could clearly hear the cat snoring, belly-up in front of the range. In deference to the vicar’s religious sensibilities, Mrs Crisp had covered certain areas with a strategic tea towel.

Nobody spoke and I realised, with no sense of surprise, that it was up to me again. These days, I’m almost completely OK with talking. There’s just a slight stutter every now and then, especially if I’m tired or upset. Today, it was surprise that tripped me up.

‘I’m ... sorry, Mr Wivenhoe, you want to ... borrow our donkey?’

He put down his mug and smiled at me, wispy white hair curling around his head, beaming like a cherub. ‘Yes, yes, Mrs Checkland. That’s right. We usually go to the donkey sanctuary, of course, but our usual donkey, Jonquil, has a nasty cough this year and they don’t want to let her out in the cold, so they recommended we try Mr Checkland. I’ve been trying to telephone him for days, but, my goodness, he’s a busy man, isn’t he, so I thought I’d call and ask in person, which is a much more polite way of going about things. And here I am. Borrowing your donkey. Just for an afternoon, of course. And quite honestly, after the ... the ... debacle of last year, we really need all the help we can get.’

I clutched wildly at a straw. ‘Debate?’

He sighed as Mrs Crisp topped up his tea and placed another slice of lemon drizzle cake in front of him. ‘I succumbed.’

‘To what?’ And realised, too late, that wasn’t the most tactful question in the universe. Should one enquire about the temptation of vicars?

‘I was against it from the start, but I have to say they made a very strong case and I really thought it would attract a younger audience. Sadly, of course, it did nothing of the kind.’

I stared, bewildered. Not for the first time, I really wished my husband was here. If he answered his phone, or even just spent some time at home occasionally, then I wouldn’t have to do this. We had been married for two years now and right from the start, Russell had established a strong tradition of never being around when needed. I was pregnant, for heaven’s sake. I should be cosily tucked up somewhere warm and comfortable, while people brought me tea and cake.

I waited for Thomas to tell me that I *was* cosily tucked up with tea and cake and to pull myself together, but of course, he didn't. Thomas wasn't with me any longer. I had to do things for myself.

Fortunately, Kevin was explaining.

'Last year was a modern version of the children's nativity play, Mrs Checkland. Mary gave birth in a bus shelter; the shepherds were three council dustmen; and three homeless people brought gifts of a tin of baked beans, a book of food stamps, and a Transformer.'

'A transformer? You mean the electrical thing?'

'No, the robot. You know, they transform.'

'Into what?'

'Um ... another robot.'

'Why?'

'I don't know,' he said hastily and I turned back to the vicar.

'Yes,' he said, sadly. 'It was a bit of a disaster, I'm afraid, so this year I'm putting my foot down. A traditional children's nativity play.'

Enlightenment dawned. 'With a traditional donkey.'

'Exactly.' He beamed at my comprehension. 'And your neighbour, Mr Braithwaite, is contributing a sheep for the shepherds – and possibly a lamb as well, although it's a little bit early, he says, but I certainly think that this year we're on to a winner. Especially with your delightful little donkey. At least, I hope we are. There was a certain amount of criticism last year.'

Poor Mr Wivenhoe. I felt so sorry for him, beset by foes on all sides. The Parish Council. The Bishop. The Ladies League of Something or Other. The Flower-Arranging Rota. The mothers of every little girl who wanted to be the Virgin Mary this year. All the Forces of Darkness gathered daily around his hapless head. No one living outside a small English village could have any comprehension of the pressures under which he laboured.

'So I hope very much that you will allow us to use your charming little donkey ...'

'Marilyn,' I said.

'Yes. Such a pretty name for such a pretty donkey. I'm sure she will be the star of the show.'

I rather thought that was supposed to be Baby Jesus, but I held my peace.

'You do ... know she's never done this sort of thing ... before?' I said, feeling he should be aware, right from the outset, of the realities of the situation.

'It will be easy,' he said, cheerfully displaying an enormous lack of knowledge of donkeys in general and Marilyn in particular. 'She just has to walk up the aisle with Mary and Joseph. We've made a little stable area from straw bales. Baby Jesus will be concealed behind one of them. At the appropriate moment (probably during the singing of "Away in a Manger"), young Alison Maynard – she's playing Mary – will pull him out and lay him in the manger. The three shepherds appear stage left – with their sheep – and

the three wise men will approach stage right.'

'Not with a camel?' I said, suddenly alarmed at the possibilities.

'Oh, my goodness me, no. Gold-painted tea caddies containing the traditional gifts.'

'I thought Fiona Braithwaite was the Virgin Mary this year,' said Sharon, disentangling more tinsel from the tenacious clutches of our ancient Christmas lights. Sharon is Mrs Crisp's niece. She and Kevin, our handyman, had been an item ever since the day she came to work at Frogmorton Farm and Kevin, unable to take his eyes off her, had walked straight into the water trough. Wheelbarrow and all.

Mr Wivenhoe sighed. Miraculously, his mug was empty again. I can only assume he absorbed his tea through osmosis.

'There was some – jostling – for the part and after a certain amount of discussion, young Fiona agreed to take on the part of Gabriel instead.'

'A ... challenging role,' I said.

'Yes,' he said uncertainly. 'It certainly is. Sadly, there has been some friction between the two young ladies, especially as each sees her own role as the most important in the proceedings.'

I could well imagine. And poor, dear Mr Wivenhoe was about to introduce yet a third female into this already volatile mix.

Speaking of volatile ... The back door crashed open and on a wave of Arctic air, my husband was suddenly in the room.

'Hello everyone,' he said cheerfully, kicking off his wellies. 'Something smells good, Mrs Crisp. I hope that's for us and you're not just boiling up my socks like last time. Why is the cat covered in a tea towel? Is it dead at last? Is that why the vicar's here? Or are we being exorcised again?'

'Mr Wivenhoe wants to borrow ... Marilyn for the children's nativity play,' I said quickly, before the vicar could query the precise meaning of the word 'again'.

He finally got rid of the last welly and wandered over to shake hands.

'Are you sure, Mr Wivenhoe? She's not really house-trained, you know.'

'The play lasts only a fraction over forty minutes, Russell. I'm hoping this will not be a problem. I've explained to Mrs Checkland that Marilyn need only walk up the aisle behind Mary and Joseph. I thought you yourself could lead her and keep her calm.'

His entire household blinked at the thought of Russell Checkland being used as a force for calm.

Blissfully unaware, the vicar continued. 'She stands still while the carols are sung and Baby Jesus laid in the manger. The play ends with them all filing out through the vestry on their way to Egypt, to escape the clutches of wicked King Herod.'

'Can't see a problem with any of that,' said Russell cheerfully, hoovering up the last slice of cake.

'You'll be in costume, of course.'

‘Will I?’ he said, suddenly much less cheerful.

‘Just a tunic and sandals.’

‘On Christmas Eve? In the church?’

‘It’s only for forty ... minutes,’ I said, ‘and we can warm you up in the ... bar ... afterwards.’

Mr Wivenhoe, having achieved his aim (as he frequently did in his own, mild-mannered, understated way) took his leave. Russell was already rummaging through his pockets, pulling out his phone.

‘Who are you calling?’

‘Andrew, of course. Why should I suffer alone? ... Andrew! How’s it going? ... Russell ... Your cousin, Russell. Stop pissing about ... No, of course I don’t want anything ... Jenny asked me to call. She doesn’t like to think of you rattling around alone in that enormous four and a half room flat of yours, crying inside for the woman you love ... No, you don’t have to be brave for me ... Beer and the Big Match tonight are no substitute for having one’s friends and family around one ... No, really, they’re not. Look, why don’t you throw a few things in a bag and come and stay for a few days. Mrs Crisp is doing her world-famous sock soup and Jenny’s not due for weeks yet ... No, of course I don’t want anything. How could you think that? Just a simple, good-hearted gesture of concern from one cousin to another ... Great. See you tonight.’

He snapped off his phone. ‘Sorted.’

Andrew arrived late that afternoon. I saw his headlights flash across the yard as he pulled in and went out to greet him.

‘Jenny!’

Andrew is Russell’s cousin. There’s very little resemblance between them. Andrew is tall and dark, good-looking in a conventional way. Russell is tall as well, but bonier and his dark red hair consistently refuses to enter into any sort of relationship with hair gel.

I smiled at him. ‘Andrew, how are you?’

‘Absolutely fine despite everything Russell says. Why on earth am I here? What’s the idiot playing at now?’

These were not deep waters in which I wished to swim.

‘No idea.’

He looked down at me. ‘Is his painting not going so well?’

I shook my head. Russell’s once flourishing career as an artist had crashed and burned a few years ago. His attempts to recapture his early success were meeting with mixed results and I could see his frustration growing. Personally, I thought he was making a mistake trying to recapture his original style. He wasn’t the same person now that he was then. Deep down, I think he knew this, but moving on was a big step into the unknown and despite his reputation for going at everything like a bull at a gate, he was hesitating.

With some difficulty, I said, ‘I worry ...’

‘What? What do you worry about?’

‘I worry that these ... days, he’s so ... crushed by everything ... family and responsibility ... that he can’t paint any more. That he’s lost that unconventional spark ... that made his work so special.’

He gave a shout of laughter. ‘Russ? What, our Russ? Crushed by responsibility? I don’t think so, Jenny.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, really.’

‘I just ...’

‘He’s had things too easy. It won’t do him the slightest harm to have to work for something for a change. In fact, it will do him good.’ He put his arm around me. ‘Don’t worry, Jenny. Everything will be fine. Tanya says so and who are we to argue?’

I remembered the traumatic first year of my marriage to Russell. Andrew and Tanya had always been there for me. Solid and reassuring – just like Thomas. I pushed that thought away because, sometimes, it still hurt to think about Thomas.

‘I know,’ I said. ‘It’s Russell. He’ll sort himself out in the end.’

He put his other arm around me – or rather, around as much of the pregnant me as he could manage. Andrew is the calm and sensible half of the Checkland coin. It’s his cousin, the more volatile Russell, who provides the drama in our daily lives.

‘What are you doing with my wife?’ said Russell, erupting through the back door at his usual speed.

‘Saying hello.’

I said to Andrew, ‘I’ll come with you and help you unpack.’

‘No you won’t,’ said Russell, severely. ‘Andrew hasn’t been here ten minutes and already he’s got his arms around my wife. It’s not good enough.’

‘Sorry,’ said Andrew, meekly. ‘I’ll make it five minutes, next time.’

I was curled up in bed with a book when Russell came in from the bathroom and started prowling restlessly around the room.

I put down my book. ‘What have you been up to ... today?’

‘Well, I tried to paint this morning and made my usual mess of things, then I rode Boxer up on the moors and then the vicar came and then I invited Andrew to stay.’

‘How’s it going?’

‘How’s what going?’

‘How’s the painting going?’

He hesitated. ‘It’s ... I ...’

This was worrying. Normally it takes an event on a par with the asteroid wiping out the dinosaurs to stop Russell talking. I waited.

He fiddled with something on his bedside cabinet and then climbed into bed.

And still I waited.

Finally, he said, ‘I’m sorry, Jenny. It’s ... I don’t know.’



I took his hand. He still had crimson paint on his thumb. 'It's all right, you know.'

'No, no it's not. I don't know ... Oh, for God's sake, I don't even know what I don't know.'

'Well, what do you know?'

'I know that I've lost it, Jenny. These last few months ...'

'You haven't lost anything, dummy. You're just looking in the wrong place.'

He smiled and put his arm around me. 'We don't see much of each other these days, do we?' He didn't want to talk about it.

'And even when we do, I'm usually asleep.'

'Not much longer now.'

'There's still about two weeks to go.'

'Nervous?'

'Yes. No. A little apprehensive, perhaps.'

'Don't be. You'll be fine. Everything will be fine, Jenny.'

I nodded and leaned back against his shoulder. He was right. Everything would be fine. Why would it not be?

And Thomas would be there for the birth. Big, beautiful, golden Thomas, who, for all the long years of my childhood had shielded me from harm. Who slowly and carefully guided me through life until I was strong enough to speak up for myself. And then left me. Because I was all grown up now and didn't need him any longer. But as I had tried to explain to him, friendship is not based on need. We didn't stop loving each other because he thought I didn't need him any longer. Friendship goes on. Friendship endures. Through the good times as well as the bad. Friendship is when two people want to be together. Not because of pain, but because of joy. He was right – I didn't need him any longer, but I certainly wanted him. I wanted to wake in the morning and see him standing, as he always did, over in the corner, filling the room with his smell of ginger biscuits.

I still remembered the day he came. I was thirteen. I still remembered the shock of looking up to see an enormous golden horse standing in my bedroom, swishing his tail and gently laughing at me. I still remembered his wisdom, his kindness and his unending patience with a little girl who couldn't even say her own name properly. I missed him every day. Yes, I was happy. I loved my life even though I still missed Thomas. But I'd see him again. He'd promised he would return. For the birth of our first child, he'd said. And yes, I was nervous, but Thomas would be there – somewhere, somehow – making everything all right.

I awoke quite late the next morning and when I went downstairs, everyone was in the kitchen, discussing the best ways to get Marilyn ready for her starring role.

'She needs a bath,' said Russell, watching her as she tip-tapped around the yard in the frosty sunshine, investigating everything, just in case it had

suddenly become edible.

‘She’s not dirty,’ I said, indignantly.

‘No, she’s not, but she leaves a definite trail of donkey wherever she goes.’

‘Well, of course she does,’ said Andrew. ‘What did you expect her to smell of? Giraffe?’

‘I don’t expect her to smell at all. Especially after you’ve given her a bath.’

‘What? Why me?’

‘You’re a vet. You have experience of this sort of thing.’

‘I’m a bloody vet, not a beautician. You bathe her.’

‘Too busy painting.’

‘Kevin, then.’

‘Too busy working.’

‘Jenny.’

‘Too busy gestating.’

‘Bloody hell, Russ! You made me miss the footie for this?’

In the end, the three of them did it together. Russell, Andrew, and Kevin. Worrying about her catching cold if they hosed her down in the yard, they brought her inside and carried her upstairs to the family bathroom.

Before anyone wonders, Marilyn is tiny and very portable. Russell found her starving in a field, broke down the gate, and rescued her. I remembered him carrying her back to his Land Rover. She widdled on him in gratitude. Thomas was with us that day ... Stop thinking about Thomas. He had said he would be here ...

Anyway, we’re not sure if Marilyn is so tiny because of her poor start in life or because she is actually an undocumented Mediterranean miniature donkey. It doesn’t matter – she’s Marilyn. She’s a lovely soft brown colour with a mane that looks like a toilet brush on steroids. She peers coyly from under her forelock, batting huge frond-like eyelashes – usually just prior to doing something completely outrageous. She’s insatiably curious, perpetually hungry, and harbours a requited passion for Boxer, Russell’s idiot horse. She’s an angel in donkey’s clothing.

On the downside, she has the lung capacity of the European Wind Tunnel and she doesn’t hesitate to use it. On the rare occasions when things don’t go her way, she lets her ears droop, squeezes her eyes shut, inflates her lungs to maximum capacity, and lets rip. Russell swears her voice could knock satellites out of their near-earth orbits. And it’s not a pretty little hee-haw, either – it’s a supersonic bellow that rattles the glass in the windows, dying away to a kind of liquid gurgle that sounds like the last gasp of a cockerel having its throat cut. Our neighbour Martin Braithwaite once knocked at the door to enquire whether someone was being chainsawed.

There was no way we could inflict that on our neighbours’ children, especially during a religious ceremony, so some sort of training plan would have to be implemented.

Nothing fancy – we didn’t want her sitting up and begging.

‘No!’ said Andrew, forcibly, as Russell’s eyes sparkled at the suggestion. ‘She just needs to learn to walk slowly, stand still when she’s told, and not to eat the floral arrangements.’

‘Or ... Baby Jesus,’ I said, quickly, because no one was paying any attention to my worst nightmare.

‘And,’ said Russell, ‘who better to teach her all this – after her bath, obviously – than our resident animal expert. It’s perfect.’

‘I have to sort out a sheep as well, you know,’ said Andrew, quickly.

‘No you don’t. I was talking to Martin yesterday and his wife has everything in hand there, leaving you free to concentrate on the star of the show.’

So they lugged her upstairs and placed her in the bath prior to showering her gently with warm water.

Mrs Crisp and I were on standby downstairs, with a pot of tea (for shock), a bottle of whisky (for secondary shock), a coffee and walnut cake (for us), and a chopped apple and carrot (for the young madam).

It did not go well.

We sat at the kitchen table and listened. We heard the faint metallic bong as her hooves made contact with the enamel bath. Followed by a pattern of skittery bongs as she ran up and down the bath looking for the way out. We heard the hiss of the shower, the shouts of warning, the screams of panic, the crash as something shattered on the floor, the frantic cry as Russell put his leg down the toilet, the chink as the shower curtain came down, the clatter as the curtain rod followed it, the cry of pain from Kevin, the toilet flushing (?), the shout of alarm from Russell, the clatter of tiny hooves along the landing, and Andrew demanding to know which idiot – Russell – had forgotten to shut the bathroom door.

We listened to them careering overhead, from one bedroom to the next.

Mrs Crisp rolled her eyes.

I cut the cake.

They all appeared in the kitchen some quarter hour later. A bone-dry and very unbathed Marilyn homed in on her apple and carrot, inhaled them in one breath, and stared fixedly at the cake. Russell, Andrew, and Kevin, soaked to the skin, bypassed the tea and went straight to the whisky without passing go or collecting £200. Kevin had a split lip. Something unpleasant was adhering to Andrew’s T-shirt. Russell had a blue leg. They all stank of donkey.

We looked at them in silence.

‘Actually,’ said Andrew, topping up his glass, ‘now I come to think of it, I might have some sort of dry-cleaning dog shampoo that we could use instead. What? Why are you all looking at me like that?’

The plan to bathe her having been quietly shelved, they had moved on to Phase 2. Russell had not-very-regretfully abandoned his painting that morning and was embracing his responsibilities as assistant to the star of the forthcoming nativity play very seriously. On this chilly, but bright morning,

he, Kevin, and Marilyn had assembled in the yard for training. Although who would be training whom would be interesting.

Russell and Marilyn regarded each other. Boxer hung over his stable door in his usual state of bemused confusion.

‘Right,’ said Russell, ‘it’s perfectly straightforward, Marilyn. You wear this pretty new halter we bought you and ...’

I never saw it happen, but suddenly she was at the other end of the yard and they were left blinking in the vacuum. ‘What just happened?’

‘I don’t think she liked the halter,’ said Mrs Crisp, crossing the yard to hang out the washing.

‘Surely not,’ said Russell, advancing towards her (Marilyn, I mean), and holding the halter behind his back. Sadly for him, she wasn’t born yesterday and again skipped nimbly out of his reach.

‘Right,’ said Russell, again, breathing heavily. ‘Time to box clever. Kevin, get some carrots. Make sure she sees you trying to hide them. Tip-toe across the yard in a suspicious manner and nip into her box.’

There are no words to describe Kevin’s attempts to cross the yard clutching half a dozen surreptitious carrots while simultaneously appearing not to cross the yard clutching half a dozen surreptitious carrots. Sharon was in stitches, which didn’t help at all.

Marilyn, however, immediately moved to investigate and in typical Frogmorton fashion, the three of them, Kevin, Russell, and Marilyn, all converged on the stable door together, which, in the best traditions of the proverb, was unbolted. There was a slight bottleneck as they all struggled to get through at the same time and then they disappeared from view.

Mrs Crisp joined me. Sharon brought us a cup of tea, we made ourselves comfortable on the old bench by the back door, and waited for the next instalment.

They appeared only a few minutes later, Marilyn wearing her smart new halter and a determined expression. There was no sign of the carrots.

There were problems immediately. Marilyn, who, unaltered, would follow anyone anywhere, especially if she thought there was food at the end of it, refused to budge now that she was condemned to a state of oppressed bondage. Assuming an expression similar to the Israelites as they were shunted off to Babylon in chains, she hung her head, heaving a heart-rending sigh.

Russell twitched the leading rein gently. ‘Come on, Marilyn. Walkies!’

She stood stock still, eyes tightly shut.

He increased the pressure slightly.

She leaned backwards.

‘My money’s on Marilyn,’ said Mrs Crisp.

‘Fifty pence on Mr Checkland,’ said Sharon, loyally. ‘He can be very ... determined.’

Russell increased the pressure. Marilyn leaned back further, now at an

angle of about forty-five degrees to the ground. Russell pulled again. Slowly, but surely, her hooves began to slide across the yard. She opened her eyes in surprise, looked around her, judged her audience beautifully, and uttered a mournful cry that tore at the heartstrings.

‘This is no good,’ said Russell in exasperation. ‘We can’t heave her up the aisle like this. Her feet will leave grooves in the floor and there won’t be a dry eye in the house. Everyone will be on their phones reporting our cruelty to the RSPCA, who will arrest us all. Jenny will give birth in prison, handcuffed to a bed. Mrs Crisp will end up running the prison mafia. Kevin will be covered in prison tats. And because I’m so good looking, I’ll suffer a fate worse than death in the showers and become someone’s bitch. I watch TV. I know what happens in prisons. And it’s all your fault,’ he said accusingly to Marilyn, who was batting her eyelashes at Sharon in the hope that something edible would materialise on the spot.

I put down my mug and crossed the yard into the stable. Boxer is Russell’s horse and has the brains of a pencil, but he and Marilyn are deeply attached. Pulling down his halter, I led him out into the theatre of operations. Marilyn watched closely. She’d seen this hundreds of times before. She was just being difficult. I walked slowly up and down with Boxer, which, with his mental capacity, was about all he was capable of anyway. Russell, getting the idea, followed on behind with Marilyn. Sharon and Mrs Crisp clapped and cheered. Thirty minutes later, we turned Boxer out into the field and Marilyn was so busy showing off her walking and standing still skills that she didn’t even notice.

I resumed my seat and smirked.

‘Actually, I was just going to suggest that,’ muttered Russell.

Andrew finished work early that afternoon and joined us as we watched Marilyn take Russell for a walk around the yard. He was carrying a package.

‘My contribution to our upcoming religious experience,’ he announced, displaying a tartan dog-coat. ‘It’s better than that scruffy old blanket she usually wears and it’ll be cold in the church.’

Russell, who had watched all this, said, ‘And yet, apparently, it’s perfectly all right for me to freeze my boll— my feet off wearing just a tunic and sandals?’

‘No one cares about you,’ said Andrew heartlessly. ‘Let’s see if it fits.’

Russell, obviously remembering his earlier struggles, said, ‘She’ll never wear it, you know.’

‘Of course she will. It’s Black Watch tartan.’

‘What’s that got to do with it?’

‘Well she can’t wear Royal Stewart, can she? Not with her colouring. Use your loaf, Russ. This look is elegant and fashion-forward.’

‘You wear one-hundred-year-old jeans!’

‘Well, at least my T-shirts don’t look like paint charts!’

‘And your jacket has those stupid leather patches on the elbows. What do

you know of fashion?’

‘More than you do. Face it, Russ, even Boxer’s better dressed than you.’

Since Russell looked good in pretty well anything he chose to wear, and knew it, this was water off a duck’s back.

I took Andrew back into the house before they started criticising each other’s underpants.

‘Have you heard from Tanya?’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I have. She’s on her way back from Germany. In time for Christmas. If the weather holds.’

‘Looking forward to seeing her again?’

He smiled softly, ‘You know the answer to that one. And how are you today?’

I sighed. ‘Big. Fat. Clumsy.’

He smiled down at me. ‘No, you’re not. And thank you for asking me to stay, by the way.’ He jerked his head back over his shoulder where Marilyn had confounded all expectations by hurling herself into her new coat and was now parading around the yard rather in the manner of a model at the Victoria’s Secret fashion show. ‘I wouldn’t have missed this for worlds.’

‘What are you doing?’ demanded Russell, bursting in through the back door at his usual speed.

Andrew kissed my hand. ‘Expressing my gratitude to your lovely wife.’

‘Well, don’t.’ He regarded Mrs Crisp. ‘You do know I hold you to blame for all this moral laxity, don’t you? You and your gentlemen callers. I thought I’d made it perfectly clear to everyone that there is to be no canoodling during working hours. I’m going to speak to Mr Wivenhoe and enlist his support in my crusade to banish inappropriate behaviour in the workplace. It’s a bad example to set to young people, Mrs Crisp. I’m surprised at you. This is precisely the sort of thing that gives us a bad name in the ’hood. You can be sure this behaviour will be reflected in your pay packet at the end of the month.’

Mrs Crisp, who had just the one gentleman caller, a discreet entity known to us as Bill the Insurance Man, reached casually for her steak hammer and Russell suddenly remembered he had to be somewhere else.

The day of the nativity play probably dawned. The sky was so low and heavy it was difficult to say. Thick, dark clouds full of snow scudded in all directions. The wind had changed.

Russell shot off after breakfast. ‘Martin Braithwaite rang. I’m off to help him bring his sheep down off the moor. I’ll take Boxer – I can cover more ground that way – and we’ll drive them down, so don’t be surprised if you look out of the window and our fields are full of sheep.’

‘Just make sure they’re the right sheep.’

‘Can’t make any promises. At this time of year they all look the same. Grey and pregnant.’

I knew the feeling. ‘I just don’t want to have to testify at your sheep

rustling trial. And *please* make sure you're back by two this afternoon. You're leading a donkey up the aisle.'

But he was gone.

And he didn't come back.

The clouds got lower. The day got darker. The odd snowflake drifted down. Mrs Crisp kept me busy in the kitchen but every time I looked out of the window, I could see Kevin crossing the yard to lean over the gate and peer up the lane.

We had an early lunch and began to prepare Norma Jean for her first public appearance. She'd been brushed; her little hooves oiled; her mane tamed – but only temporarily. Thirty seconds later it all sprang back into vertical life again.

'Never mind,' said Sharon. 'Look what I've brought.'

She gathered up Marilyn's forelock and tied it in a beautiful blue satin bow. Marilyn blinked and looked around in astonishment, possibly seeing clearly, for the first time, where she'd been living for the last two years.

With a toot, Andrew pulled into the yard and Kevin quickly shut the gate behind him before he realised that Russell wasn't back yet and he was first reserve.

'Why can't Kevin do it?' he demanded indignantly, as he was bundled upstairs to change.

'Escorting the ladies,' said Kevin with a grin. A remark he would subsequently come to regret.

Mrs Crisp and Sharon busied themselves in the kitchen, and at something of a loose end, I tried to relax. Seeking some distraction from worrying over Russell, adrift on the moors, accompanied only by a bunch of gormless sheep and a horse with the IQ of a banana, I wandered around the house, plumping cushions, straightening ornaments, and wiping the odd surface down with my sleeve. I straightened books. I put more blue stuff down the toilet. I tidied Russell's shoes away. I took a magazine from the pile on the coffee table and sat down to read, only to get up almost immediately and arrange the pile into chronological order. I stared out of the window and wondered whether I should stay at home and wait for Russell. I rearranged the magazines into alphabetical order. From the corner of my eye, I saw Mrs Crisp and Sharon exchange glances.

'What?' I said.

'Nothing,' they said.

'Are you sure you still want to go this afternoon, Mrs Checkland?' asked Mrs Crisp. 'It's very cold today. Perhaps you should stay in the warm.'

'Yes,' I said, immediately deciding not to stay at home after all. 'Of course I'm going. I wouldn't miss this for anything. And Russell will be back any minute now.'

They nodded in that way people do when trying to reassure the simple-minded.

Andrew was not happy.

'I'm not happy,' he announced.

'I can't think why not,' I said. 'You look adorable.'

'I looked even more adorable before you draped me with some old blanket and a tea towel. My legs are cold. Can I wear socks?'

'Seriously, sandals and socks?'

'It's not a fashion parade, you know.'

'Don't you have thermal underwear?'

'Yes, but not realising the hardships I would be expected to endure here, I didn't bring it with me.'

'Seriously? You ... came to stay with Russell without bringing any ... survival gear?'

He subsided, muttering. I waited for him to demand to know why Russell hadn't returned because this was all his fault. He didn't. He was as worried as I was. And like me, he was putting on a brave face.

The old church wasn't much warmer inside than outside, but it was beautiful in its shabbiness. Soft, gentle lights glinted on the candlesticks on the altar. The flower-arranging teams had striven to outdo each other and four beautiful arrangements in red, gold, and green stood in each corner of the church, and most importantly, nowhere near Marilyn's route to the stable. Straw bales made a snug little stable area and a low wooden manger filled with hay stood on the floor, ready for its occupant.

Sadly it seemed the organist, Mrs McSweeney, had sprained her wrist while stuffing her Christmas turkey and was temporarily *hors de combat*. Her place had been taken by her eldest son, Colin, a shy, solitary lad and a music student. Soft chords drifted around the thick Norman pillars and was lost in the darkness above our heads. Let people believe it was Bach, if they wanted to. I was almost certain he was playing 'A Whiter Shade of Pale', which given the falling snow outside was quite appropriate, really.

We seated ourselves. Mrs Crisp first; then me, taking up more than my fair share of pew; then Sharon, with Kevin on the end in case of Marilyn-related emergencies. He carried a backpack with a spare halter, a lifetime's supply of carrots, and a hopefully not-to-be-needed first aid kit.

I stared around anxiously. No Russell. I hadn't thought he would be here, but I was pregnant and entitled to clutch at straws. On the other side of the aisle, Monica Braithwaite was looking for Martin. We caught each other's eye, nodded, and smiled, each pretending we weren't in the slightest bit worried. The gentle murmur of conversation rose up around us. I could smell the warm smell of straw, old hymn books, and hot dust as the heaters fought a losing battle with damp stone.

Somewhere, a signal was given. Colin brought the (probably not) Bach to a graceful conclusion. There was silence for a minute, and then the Angel Gabriel appeared, very dramatically, out of the gloom. Supplanted she may have been, but Fiona Braithwaite was obviously determined to wring every



last moment of drama from her performance.

She wore the obligatory white sheet and a tinsel halo. How much more difficult must it be to kit out nativity plays in these days of patterned duvet covers? And dishwashers. No more tea towels for those eastern headdresses. As compensation for not being chosen to be Mary, her beautiful golden wings had been designed by Russell, cut out by me, and glued by her mother, during a cosy afternoon in her kitchen. Dramatically lit from beneath, she stood on her straw bale and extended her arms. I felt the usual shiver run through me.

‘And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.’

‘Nothing changes,’ grumbled a man behind me. His wife shushed him.

‘And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee out of the city of Nazareth into Judea unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem. To be taxed with Mary, his espoused wife, being great with child.’

She paused for a moment, the echoes of her voice dying away, and here they came.

Joseph led the way, stumping determinedly up the aisle, with his shepherd’s crook (borrowed from the Braithwaites). He wore an old brown dressing gown, tied with a sash. Behind him came the Virgin Mary, resplendent in a blue velvet robe that had obviously cost a fortune. Impractical long sleeves trailed on the ground and a white veil framed her face. Her hands were clasped and her eyes raised piously heavenwards. She caught sight of Fiona, dramatically lit on her bale, and a small expression of annoyance flickered over her face. I heard a faint snort from the other side of the aisle.

I felt like snorting myself and my efforts at decorum caused a sudden cramping pain which I forgot about immediately, because here came our girl, tip-tapping alongside a poker-faced Andrew, in her smart tartan dog-coat and very fetching blue bow. Not, probably a realistic look for a first-century donkey, but giving the congregation the full benefit of her saintly expression and huge dark eyes. Her little hooves clattered softly on the stone floor.

‘Aaaaaawwww,’ said the congregation en masse. I could hear at least two kids demanding a donkey for Christmas.

There was a slightly awkward moment when she paused to investigate the wreaths hanging from the end of each pew, but since they mostly consisted of substantial amounts of holly, she lost interest. I could not relax, however. The Baby Jesus might still be in peril.

The organ started up and we sang ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem’ as they arrived at the stable and with some fuss, they got themselves into position. The Angel Gabriel, from her dominant position on the straw bale, smirked down at the kneeling Virgin Mary who glared back again. Joseph, sensibly, kept his head down.

To my own surprise, I found myself suddenly overwhelmed with emotion, fighting back tears and swallowing huge lumps in my throat. I found a tissue,

sniffed, and made myself concentrate. The Angel Gabriel was speaking again.

‘And so it was, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.’

Mr Wivenhoe had wisely sidestepped the whole ‘room at the inn’ issue. Apparently, years ago, while taking part in his own nativity play, a young Russell had thrown the whole afternoon into confusion by flinging open the door and inviting them all inside. ‘There’s plenty of room at the inn.’ The young Andrew, in his role as second innkeeper and anxious to adhere to the plot, had attempted to push them all back out again. There had been Words.

We dutifully sang ‘Away in a Manger’ and with a certain amount of groping under the straw, the small bundle signifying the Baby Jesus was held high, rather in the manner of *The Lion King*, and then ceremonially laid in the manger. Marilyn watched all this with huge interest. I held my breath but Andrew was there to intervene. No kids would be traumatised by seeing Baby Jesus eaten at birth.

‘And there were in the same country, shepherds abiding in their fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night.’

I spared a thought for Russell and Martin, searching for their own flocks out there in the snow. Surely they should be back by now. Surely I would return to Frogmorton to find Russell sprawled in front of the range with a beer in one hand and a bacon sandwich in the other, full of inventive excuses for his non-appearance. Please. Let that happen.

Under cover of looking around the church, I kept craning my neck to see if Russell was maybe standing at the back. On the other side of the aisle, I could see Monica doing the same. In this quiet church, the wind sounded very loud.

‘And lo – the angel of the Lord came upon them and the glory of the Lord shone about them and they were sore afraid.’

Cue the spotlight on three dramatically cowering shepherds and a very unimpressed and very fat sheep.

We sang ‘While Shepherds Watched their Flocks by Night’, as the three shepherds heaved themselves to their feet and appeared in the stable. Marilyn immediately abandoned her scrutiny of the Baby Jesus and fixed the sheep with an expression of deep professional rivalry. The sheep ignored her and tried to lie down. There was a small wrestling match between the sheep and the shepherds, one of whom was Martin’s son and who was looking extremely anxious.

I wished that Russell was here. He would have enjoyed this so much. As would Thomas. And today, neither of them was present. I folded my arms over my stomach and leaned forward to ease the cramp. It didn’t help at all.

‘Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, behold, there came three wise men from the East. And lo – the star which they saw in the East went before them.’

And here came the Wise Men, beautifully attired in their mothers' curtains and a vast amount of Christmas tinsel, all clutching their meticulously painted tea caddies. Before them, carefully watching where he put his feet, walked young Charlie Kessler, grinning from ear to ear. Charlie went to the special school on the other side of Rushford and this was his first nativity play ever. He was obviously enjoying every moment. And he had a line to say, as well. According to his mother, he had been practising solidly for the last two weeks. He beamed with pride and excitement and waved madly to his family, all of whom beamed and waved right back. Charlie was portraying The Star, and as such, carried a long pole with a beautiful golden star (Russell again) dangling from the end.

The congregation sang 'We Three Kings' as they slowly approached the stable.

That sheep was making a lot of noise. I saw Andrew lean over to look. Marilyn also, was struggling to climb over the straw bales to see what was going on.

One of the shepherds, Martin's son, said doubtfully, 'Um, Mr Checkland ...?'

Oh God. The sheep was dying. Our nativity play was to be presided over by a dead sheep. Surely this could not be happening ...

Andrew handed Marilyn's lead to Charlie. 'Here you go, Charlie. You're in charge of the donkey for a moment. Hold tight now.'

Charlie nearly burst. This was easily the most exciting day of his life.

The sheep really was making an awful lot of noise, completely upstaging the Virgin Mary who, with commendable dedication to her part, still knelt in prayer but was looking extremely cross about it. Marilyn was craning her neck like a giraffe. Charlie leaned over to have a look and gasped with excitement.

'Hey, Mum! Guess what's just fallen out of this sheep's bottom!'

Even Mary opened her eyes at that, screamed 'Eeeew!', and scrambled to get away, abandoning Baby Jesus to his fate. I saw Fiona Braithwaite and her mother exchange glances and then look away again. Monica looked particularly pleased with herself. I wondered just who had selected this particular sheep for this particular performance.

All around us, the children in the audience were fighting their way into the aisle for a better view. One little girl, her thumb in her mouth, crept slowly towards the stable. Other children followed suit. Without a word being spoken, they seated themselves cross-legged on the stone floor, eyes and mouths wide with wonder. It struck me that next year, Mr Wivenhoe was going to have to incorporate the Cirque du Soleil at the very least, to better this year's effort.

Andrew performed a few basic tasks, mercifully hidden behind a straw bale, and then announced, 'No cause for alarm, anyone. It's a boy. Mother and child doing well,' and kicked loose straw over the messy bits.

‘Aaaaawwww,’ said the congregation and I could hear at least two children demanding a newborn lamb for Christmas.

We took a moment for everyone to have a good look, and then there was silence for a moment because everyone seemed to have lost the thread.

‘Well,’ said Mr Wivenhoe, appearing unnervingly out of the darkness to get us all back on track. ‘Wasn’t that exciting, everyone? Now, where had we got to? Oh yes. It’s time for Mary and Jesus to depart for Egypt and we shall sing ‘O Come All Ye Faithful’. Everyone’s favourite. When you’re ready, Colin.’

The opening chords echoed through the church, joyful and jubilant, but something was wrong. All the light and excitement had disappeared from Charlie’s face. Stricken, he looked up at Andrew, tried to say something, failed miserably, sat down on a bale, and burst into tears. Marilyn surged forwards but even this wasn’t enough to calm him. Andrew stepped over the bale and sat down beside him. ‘What’s the matter, Charlie?’

Whatever it was, it was serious. He was heartbroken. Inconsolable. Shaking with sobs. Andrew patted him on the shoulder. ‘Tell me, Charlie. Maybe I can fix it.’

Around us, no one was singing. The organ petered out, uncertainly. Mr Wivenhoe appeared again and somewhat creakily crouched beside him. ‘Charlie, my dear boy. Whatever is the matter?’

He wiped his nose on his sleeve. Already, his mother was bustling towards him.

His face was blotchy with tears. ‘You forgot me. You forgot what I was supposed to say.’

‘Oh, my goodness me,’ said Mr Wivenhoe, in horror. ‘So I did. Whatever was I thinking? My dear Charlie, I am so sorry. But I think we can put this right.’

He stood up. ‘Your attention please, everyone. Charlie has a very important announcement to make.’

He stepped back. Andrew helped Charlie up onto the bale and handed him his pole. The golden star dangled bravely above his head. He took a deep breath, trembling with excitement and nerves.

I saw his mouth open but no words came. My heart went out to him.

Marilyn pushed her head forward and nibbled gently at his tunic.

He took another huge breath and closed his eyes.

‘BeholdIamtheStaroftheEast!’

There was a moment’s silence and then thunderous applause echoed throughout the church.

I clapped as hard as everyone else. My face was wet with tears. And not just my face. And not with tears. Why was I all wet? Oh no! Not now!

I leaned forwards to try and ease the pain.

‘Mrs Checkland?’ said Sharon, in sudden concern.

‘Shh!’ I said. ‘I’m fine. Just a twinge. It will pass in a minute.’

Behind me, the door opened and a sudden draught swirled through the

church, making the candles flicker. He was here. Russell was back. Of course he was. He'd only been bringing sheep down off the moor, not invading a small country. How stupid was I? And if I tried to tell him how worried I'd been, he'd just laugh at my pregnancy nerves.

I peered around. Not Russell. Tanya stood quietly at the back of the church. She'd made it back from Germany, despite the weather. A small miracle in itself. How happy Andrew would be. Then I lost sight of her as she slipped into a pew. Had he seen her?

No. He was chatting quietly to Charlie Kessler. The two of them sat side by side on their straw bale. Marilyn was investigating Charlie's pockets, just in case either of them had missed anything edible. I wondered if Tanya was watching Andrew and thinking, as I was, what a great dad he would make. Not for the first time, I wondered what sort of father Russell would turn out to be. Too late to worry about that now.

And at last it was time for the final hymn. Colin had another go at the opening chords of 'O Come All Ye Faithful' and everyone got to their feet. Except me. I concentrated on a knot in the pew in front of me. The pain was swift and strong. I leaned forward again. Mrs Crisp sat beside me.

'Just breathe deeply, Mrs Checkland. In a few minutes, we can bring the car round and take you home.'

I nodded. Around me, voices swelled in song. Everyone likes 'O Come All Ye Faithful'. It was the final hymn and everyone was giving it all they'd got.

In the stable, Mary and Joseph gathered up the mercifully uneaten Baby Jesus and departed for Egypt with Andrew and Marilyn and Charlie, who refused to be parted from his new friend. No one seemed to mind. The shepherds and wise men followed on behind. The sheep stayed put. I rather envied her.

Mr Wivenhoe said a few words, none of which I heard and after the blessing, the congregation filed out. We sat and waited for everyone to leave.

The wind sounded very loud in the suddenly silent church. I began to shiver. Was Russell still out in this? Where was he? I suddenly remembered the old superstition that for every new arrival in a family, another member must depart. Suppose Russell was making room for this new child?

Strangely, when I mentioned this theory, no one seemed inclined to take it very seriously.

'Please try and stay calm, Mrs Checkland,' said Sharon, her own voice wobbling and so I made a massive effort not to panic. Which didn't mean I stopped worrying on the inside. I was shivering – with cold, with fear, with shock – and trying desperately not to cry, because surely all this was too early, when, suddenly, over the various smells of church, candles and agitated sheep, there it was. At long last, there it was, bringing back the memories of safety, security, and a big golden horse whose eyes were soft with love.

I smelled warm ginger biscuits.

And then Tanya was here.

‘You will sit back, Jenny, and breathe slowly. That is good. Has anyone thought to time the contractions? Sharon, you will do so. Kevin, please ask Andrew to join us. And I am not at all surprised at having to ask this, but where is Russell?’

No response. She sighed, heavily.

‘Kevin, can you please take Marilyn home?’

‘Yes,’ said Kevin thankfully making himself scarce, because this was Women’s Work.

I smiled to myself. This was Thomas’s doing. If he couldn’t come – he sent. And here was Tanya, miraculously appearing out of the East, taking charge and effortlessly organising us feckless Checklands back into line.

The next ten minutes were a bit of a blur – everything was lost in the business of getting me to the car so we could drive the couple of hundred yards back to Frogmorton. The snow was coming down heavily now. And if it was heavy here, how bad must it be up on the moor? Half way home, we overtook Marilyn and Kevin, making their way homewards. The two of them were dancing in the snow, jumping in and out of snowdrifts, kicking great heaps of it at each other. Having the time of their lives. Kevin waved as we went past. Marilyn looked a picture in her beloved tartan dog-coat. I had a horrible feeling she wouldn’t be parting with it until at least July and possibly not even then.

I’m not going into the details, but our daughter was born an hour or so later, at Frogmorton, in a proper bed, delivered by a tunic-wearing vet; his girlfriend; the forensic accountant, and Mrs Crisp – whose role apparently consisted of boiling up vast reservoirs of water. I have no idea what she did with it all afterwards.

After it was all over, and I had stared and stared at our daughter until I couldn’t keep my eyes open any longer, I lay back and slipped in and out of sleep. The sounds of bleating sheep, clattering hooves, and voices in the yard all swirled together in the winds of my dream, and when I opened my eyes, Russell was standing at the foot of the bed.

It took a second or two to register. I blinked and forgave him instantly because he’d obviously had a rough afternoon, too. He still had snow in his hair. His eyes were shadowed with anxiety, and he looked completely worn out. He smelled very strongly of sheep and horse.

I reached out my hand. ‘Got lost, did you?’

He didn’t move. ‘I promised I’d be here. I’m sorry. Are you angry?’

I leaned over and lifted the baby out of her cradle. ‘Of course not. Come and see.’

He sat very carefully on the bed, squashing neither me nor the baby. I felt my fears subside. He was going to be a great father. Unconventional, maybe. And definitely noisy. But no child of his would ever be lost or alone or afraid or ignored.

He tucked my hair behind my ears. 'I don't know, Jenny, I leave you alone for one afternoon and look what you get up to. I was thinking of trotting off to London next month for that exhibition at the Tate Modern and now I'm worried I'll get back to find you've had triplets.'

I ignored him. He was just putting off the moment. 'Do you want to hold her?'

'Should I ...? She's very small ... I don't want to ...'

'Yes, just support her head.'

'Like this?'

She looked smaller than ever in Russell's arms.

Astonishingly, he said nothing. I think, for once, he couldn't find the words. He smoothed her little tuft of hair with one finger. She opened her eyes wide at him and waved her little fists. He touched her face, gently outlining her features. She stared up at him. The room was completely silent, just the gentle spatter of snow on the window panes. He stroked her tiny hand. She unclenched her fist and took a good grip on his finger. He made a slight sound.

'I think she likes you,' I said, offering him the opportunity to say, 'Of course she likes me. Everyone likes me. I'm very likeable' and, astonishingly, he didn't. He didn't say anything.

Slightly concerned, I leaned forward to see his face and said, 'Russell?'

He was crying.

I put my arms around him. He put one of his around me and held me tightly. I could feel his tears wet on my face.

I said, 'Hey,' and wiped them away.

'I never thought I'd have this, Jenny. Back when my life was so ... so bleak. I never thought I'd have anything like this. Did you?'

I thought back to my life before Russell. That great long empty expanse of nothingness. Endless day after endless day. No future. No past. No purpose. 'No. No, I never did.'

He carefully handed her to me. 'I'm wet, cold, and dirty. I'm going to nip off and have a shower. I'll use the other bathroom so as not to disturb you and then, if you like, we'll have our first dinner together. Just the three of us. You can tell me about Marilyn's debut.'

I remembered. 'Did you see Tanya?'

'Yes. Andrew's taken her home. While they could still get back to Rushford. It's quite bad out there.'

I remembered again. 'Where were you all this time? What happened up there?'

He paused from yanking clothes from drawers. 'Oh, yes, I was going to ask you. Do you know anyone who's got a big horse up on the moor? A really big horse?'

My heart thumped. It took me several seconds to say, 'No.'

'Well, someone has. It all went wrong, Jenny. It took far longer than we

thought to find the sheep and then we had to dig most of them out. Which also took forever. And then, somehow, we got turned around. It happens so easily. We couldn't find the path down. Everything was covered in snow. The sheep were useless – all the sense of direction of a sock. And then Boxer neighed and something answered and we saw it standing on the hill ahead of us. Biggest horse I ever saw in my life. We couldn't get close, but I followed it down. And the sheep followed me. Martin brought up the rear. And here we are.'

He disappeared. I heard him clattering off down the landing, singing. A door opened and closed.

Silence fell.

A special sort of silence. The silence of expectancy. The expectancy of a dark, snow-filled night on Christmas Eve.

I looked over to the dim corner of the room and smiled. 'I can see you, you know.'

He came towards the bed, swishing his tail and filling the room with his smell of ginger biscuits.

*'Jenny, my dear friend.'*

I could hardly speak, but he would want me to make an effort. 'Thomas.'

*'How are you?'*

'Well, thank you.'

*'And the little one?'*

'See for yourself.'

I pushed back the bedclothes, wobbled to my feet, and brought her over.

She stared up at the big, golden horse and the big, golden horse stared down at her.

*'Jenny, she is quite beautiful.'*

'Yes,' I said proudly. 'She is, isn't she?'

*'Does she have a name?'*

'Yes, I named her after you.'

That startled him. *'You named her Thomas?'*

'No. I named her Joy.'

She screwed up her face, smacked her lips, and tried to suck her tiny fist.

*'Jenny ... She's an angel.'*

I smiled at him. 'I always remember the last time I saw you. Up on the moor. Galloping away over the crest of the hill. And then, just before you disappeared, you kicked up your heels for the sheer joy of living. So I named her Joy because you bring me joy. Even when you're not actually here. Speaking of not being here, thank you for bringing Russell home safely.'

*'He was lost, Jenny. He didn't know which way to go.'* He sighed. *'He hasn't changed much, has he?'*

'Actually, I think he has. He doesn't drink so much. He doesn't shout so much ...'

*'But ...?'*



‘But he doesn’t paint so much, either. It’s as you said – he doesn’t know which way to go. He’s lost,’ I said sadly, silently cursing my lack of life experience. ‘I should be helping him through this and I don’t know what to do.’

*‘Jenny, I think you’ve already done it. I think he draws his inspiration from his own life as he is, at that moment, living it. When he was younger, more brash, more confident, his work reflected that. Now he is older. He’s had his fair share of disappointment and heartbreak. Just as all of us do, Jenny. It’s called life. He is, at the moment, very unsure of himself, especially in this new role as father – a very novel sensation for Russell Checkland and one which won’t do him any harm at all. He will emerge. You wait and see. And now, you’ve given him this little person to care for.’*

I smiled. ‘And you, Thomas, how are you?’

*‘I’m well, and, as always, all the better for seeing you. Sometimes, I miss you very much.’*

‘I miss you, too.’

*‘Ah, but you have this little one now. Sometimes ...’*

‘Yes?’

*‘Sometimes I wonder if you will forget me.’*

‘You know I never will. I owe you too much.’

*‘Jenny, I did nothing. You did it all yourself. And now I must go.’*

I knew better than to try and keep him here. He expected more from me.

‘It was good to see you again, Thomas. And thank you again for bringing Russell home.’

*‘We shall see each other again ...’*

‘Will we? When?’

But he was already fading. I could see the outline of the chest of drawers behind him. There was a last lingering of ginger biscuits and then he was gone.

Thomas was right. She was an angel. A happy angel. She was Russell’s daughter, with all of his charm and erratic behaviour, but slightly less messy eating habits.

Russell adored her and she him and yes; he turned out to be an unorthodox but effective father. He spent hours beside her cradle, talking incessantly to her, dashing off sketch after sketch, letting them fall to the floor in his excitement to start the next one.

And he painted. All day, every day. It was as if a dam had burst. Light and exuberance and movement exploded from every canvas he touched as he brought all the colours and complexities of life to his paintings. He painted his world as he saw it and it was joyful. Every afternoon we would sit with him in his studio as he jabbed at his canvases, whistling, singing odd snatches of tunes, talking to himself. Every now and then he would look across the room to us and smile. He was happy. Because in painting Joy, he had found hope.

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